

# THE PATRON OF SORCERY

Dakhla Sba

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During a recent conversation, a student of ancient Egypt mentioned to me the cult of Isis and Osiris and its survival of the fall of Egypt as a Mediterranean "mystery religion". As an initiate of the modern Temple of Set, I began to wonder to what extent the original cult of Set had survived that civilization, and what documented forms this survival had taken.

I found an answer in Hans Dieter Betz's edition of *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). In the twilight of Egyptian civilization, Set, the Lord of Darkness denounced by followers of Osiris, became a patron of sorcery. This apparently occurred by way of Egyptian priests moving into freelance magical practice after foreign domination led to loss of royal funding for the temples.

It is strange to envision the Egyptian priests consigning their lore to the written word, given their notorious reputation for xenophobia and secrecy. Significantly, while these spells span the full range of magical operations, little of a theoretical character is disclosed.

In PGM IV 154-285, there's an invocation of the Feared One that specifically mentions the defeat of Osiris, the dying god, and the Setian power over the hypnotic gaze of Apep, serpent and neter of chaos that threatened the solar barque:

"Oh dark's disturber, thunder's bringer, whirlwind,  
Night- flasher, breather-forth of hot and cold...  
I'm He who searched with you the whole world and  
Found great Osiris, whom I brought you chained.  
I'm he who joined you in war with the gods!  
I'm he who closed heav'ns double gates and  
put to sleep the serpent who must not be seen..."

Later in the same text the magician addresses the rising sun:

"...You who are fearful, awesome, threatening,  
You who're obscure and irresistible,  
And hater of the wicked, you I call,  
Typhon, in hours unlawful and unmeasured..."

As mentioned elsewhere, the rising sun was one of the symbols of Xepera, the ancient Egyptian concept of Self-Creation.

Fragments of Egyptian are found everywhere in these Greek spells. The 'true names' "erbeth", "pakerbeth" and "bolchoseth" appear repeatedly in invocations of Set. They may be corrupted praise names. The words are seen in binding and restraining spells (PGM IV 2145-2240, perhaps PGM VII 467-77, PGM XXXVI 1-34), spells to charm and subject (PGM VII 940-68, PGM XLVI 4-8), to cause separation (PGM XII 365-75, PDM XII 62-75 and XII 76-107), "evil sleep" (PDM XIV 675-94) and crazed lust (PGM XXVI 69-101).

It is in the spells for self- initiation that one gets a sense of how the destruction of their civilization shaped the perspective of those who used these conjurations. The social machinery of the temple tradition responsible for these spells was dying, or already dead, and it was the individual who now pursued the magical arts for individual ends. Freelance practice of this type was solitary and secretive compared to the observances of state cults or even the mystery-religions. This presents problems in evaluating the significance of the papyri as evidence for survivals of the ancient cult of Set.

The magical papyri presented by Betz are thought to have come from a private library in Thebes and date from the 2nd century BCE through the 5th century CE. We can't be sure if this collection of surviving scrolls is representative, or if it reflects a cult of Set in Graeco-Roman Egypt. But they do show that some literate Egyptians not only identified Typhon with Set but invoked the powers of Set-Typhon, hailed Set-Typhon as a divine power, and so forth.

Strange though the magical papyri seem to us today, they document a flow of "operative" temple knowledge from Egypt into the Mediterranean world. This naturally invites speculation as to what theoretical or abstract knowledge might also have passed by way of the Egyptians who wrote these papyri in the twilight of their civilization.

In *Hermetic Magic* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1995) Stephen Flowers affirms that the magical papyri were a major root of the Western magical philosophy called Hermeticism. Betz states frankly in his preface to *The Greek Magical Papyri* --

"It is known that philosophers of the Neopythagorean and Neo-platonic schools, as well as Gnostic and Hermetic groups, used magical books and hence must have possessed copies. But most of their material vanished and what we have left are their quotations."

By the 2nd century of the common era, Roman hostility had driven underground the legendary state magic of Egypt. Thessalos, a Greek physician, reported that Theban priests were scandalized at his inquiry as to whether anything remained of the old Egyptian magic. Nevertheless, an old priest agreed to perform a

divination for Thessalos. His account of the working corresponds perfectly with descriptions in demotic and Greek magical papyri that have come into our hands (Robert K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993, p. 219).

We thus have cause to think that these papyri reflect authentic temple practice, and that priests of Egypt under Greek and Roman rule performed such rites until the temples were shut down. Whether this includes the invocation of Set for aggressive magic, under temple auspices, is an open question.

However diabolized Set may have become in the final days of ancient Egypt, the papyri show that his esteem among magicians survived the destruction of his temples and images. The spells of the Theban cache found their way onto curse tablets in Rome, Athens and Jerusalem. Details and comparisons of the papyri and tablets are found in John G. Gager's *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). More generally, the practice of the "spell-book" of European tradition found its prototype in the "magical cookbook" approach exemplified by the Theban papyri. Thus the written magical tradition of Europe began under the auspices of Set-Typhon, and provided the matrix for the Remanifestation of Setian thought hundreds of years later.

That the papyri themselves survived Roman suppression, a ferocious campaign of destruction of magical books under Christianity (Acts 19:19), and the rise of Islam, may itself be reckoned to border on magic. What the papyri may yet reveal of the original cult of Set-- and of such survivals as have found their way into the wellsprings of Western thought--remains to be seen.  
Xeper.

Compiled by Dakhla Sba

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